



# THE ILLUSIVE WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT

Social media has become an inextricable part of our lives. There's no denying the fact that the social media has myriad positives but this paper majorly focuses on not so greener side of the dazzling world of perfection which is limned in social media over and over again. The paper starts with a comprehensive definition of social media then goes on to reflect upon various taxing facets that come along. Social media has set unrealistic standards of fashion, beauty, appearance, food, education which gets inculcated in the minds of billions of users and then comes the mad rush to conform to those benchmarks. Social media has provided a thriving market to innumerable beauty brands. FOMO or Fear of Missing Out is another by-product of social media. A deep sense of unhappiness, anxiety, reduced productivity and lower self-esteem is often associated with it. Users may have millions of subscribers and followers but this virtual fan following donot always mirrors their offline life. Social media has uncannily conned us in believing that we have friends while in reality this is just the contrary. Besides, the spread of fake news, trolling, cyber bullying, hate speech and increasing cases of people getting duped by the fraudsters are other pitfalls of social media. It finally rests with the users how to use this double edged sword. These platforms can either be used for disseminating obscenity, hatred, or rumours else can be utilized to the fullest for enhanced networking, fostering support and empathy and even as a learning tool.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Media, Unrealistic Standards, Beauty, Fomo, Trolling, Cyber Bullying

## INTRODUCTION

Pastor Steve Furtick was spot on when he once said, "The reason we struggle with insecurity is because we compare our behind the scenes with everyone else's highlight reel"<sup>i</sup>. This is so true about social media which has become the insignia of 21<sup>st</sup> century. From the time our day commences in the morning until its closure, we're hooked on the scroll. There's no denying the fact that the social media has myriad positives as well in terms of heightened connectivity, quick access to information, civic engagement, marketing tools and employment opportunities. But this paper majorly focuses on not so greener side of the dazzling world of perfection which is limned in social media over and over again.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is predominantly a theoretical research which aims at scrutinizing if "social media is a boon or bane" for the humanity. In order to do so, first of all, the existing literature on the aforementioned topic has been dealt with. Being a qualitative research, it draws significantly from the content analysis of books, articles and editorials and also draws its contents from the relevant websites.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before diving into the depths of social media it is pertinent to understand this buzz word at the very outset. "Social media has been defined as a set of technologies that support interpersonal communication and collaboration using Internet-based platforms" (Ward, et al., 2016). "Functionally social media refers to the interaction of people and also to creating, sharing,

exchanging and commenting contents in virtual communities and networks" (Ward, et al., 2016). To sum it up, social media is a set of internet technologies that allows for interpersonal communication and collaboration, is made up of applications that interactively connect people and information and allows for the creation and exchange of user generated content (Ward, et al., 2016).

Among the best known of these tools are sites such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn and Threads which is a recent addition to the Meta's family of apps. In 2023, an estimated 4.9 billion people use social media across the world<sup>ii</sup>. The number of social media users worldwide has unusually increased to a record 4.9 billion people globally and what's even more surprising is that this number is expected to jump to approximately 5.85 billion users by 2027<sup>iii</sup>. "These aren't users tied to a single platform, either: the average user now spreads their digital footprint across a staggering six to seven platforms every month—highlighting the need for a multi-platform approach to social media marketing"<sup>iv</sup>.

Our lives have become digitised so much so that even if one tries to abstain from the use of smartphones and social media platforms, that individual will end up interacting with the ones who do (Lupton, 2015). Moreover such individuals often find their digital images or audio files being uploaded and circulated across social media platforms without their knowledge or consent (Lupton, 2015). We are now reduced to mere data subjects where our movements in public space, daily interactions with networked technologies like social media,

government and commercial institutions, banking agencies are recorded, monitored and archived (Lupton, 2015).

Isn't the recommendation of content that one comes across the social media feed is most likely to be of interest of that particular user? Isn't it quite akin to the previously watched and searched contents? This is because the social media keep tabs and records a lot of features about its users: "not only what is said, but the profiles of the speaker and the audience, how others react to the content: how many likes, comments, views, time spent on a page or 'retweets' were generated, the time of the interaction occurred, the geographical location of users, the search terms used to find the content, how content is shared across the platforms and so on" (Lupton, 2015). Social media has set unrealistic standards which consciously or unconsciously gets inculcated in the minds of billions of users and then comes the mad rush to conform to those benchmarks. This is all-pervading and continues to get emphasised through conventions of fashion, appearance, language, culture, food, education and other facts of our life. "Influencer culture sets up expectations of beauty by manipulating people's beliefs that race, body size, skin colour and ethnicity are the factors that distinguish beauty instead of what people actually look like in reality"<sup>v</sup>.

We are constantly crafting our "online personas", "carefully selecting the images we share and presenting ourselves through a beautification lens" resulting in increased use of AI driven beauty filters<sup>vi</sup>. Beauty filters, also known as make-up or selfie filters use artificial intelligence and augmented reality technology to alter and enhance the appearance of an individual's face in real time resulting in "flawless skin", "sparkling eyes" and "picture-perfect features"<sup>vii</sup>. With the constant portrayal of ideal beauty and body image comparisons by the influencers, content creators and other celebrities, it is affecting physical and mental health of users across the globe. In this quest for flawlessness and perfect selves we are losing our original selves resulting in self-objectification and appearance anxiety. Taking cue from Naomi Wolf it can be stated that the social media "transmit the beauty myth as the gospel of a new religion" (Wolf, 1991). They create an illusion and when one fails to live up to these expectations, this comparison leads to "stress, appearance dissatisfaction, sensitivity to feedback and judgments about appearance, negative self-esteem, and low mood"<sup>viii</sup>.

This digitised world provides a thriving market to innumerable beauty brands. Social media has become an increasingly significant platform for brands in order to showcase their products. As Naomi Wolf writes "the diet and skin care industries became the new cultural censors of women's intellectual space, and because of their pressure, the gaunt, youthful model supplanted the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood" (Wolf, 1991). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, have brought about a trend of promoting a plethora of products and thereby allure the users to buy them in order to accommodate a social media savvy lifestyle. The impact of social media on the "perceptual, affective, cognitive and behavioural

aspects of body" is so much so that it pushes them to "engage in life threatening beauty trends due to social compliance and acceptance in the society"<sup>ix</sup>. In the quest of attaining the slender ideal as glorified by the media, often mindless dieting and workout leads to various health hazards. From cosmetic surgeries to dermal fillers, people are ready to put themselves in great affliction in order to censor their flaws. This reminds of Wolf who once stated a French proverb "one must suffer to be beautiful" (Wolf, 1991). For instance recently a 21 years old Chinese influencer passed away while attending a weight loss camp in attempt to lose 90kgs<sup>x</sup>. Kannada actor Chetana Raj, died following post-operative complications after she underwent a fat removal surgery in Bangalore<sup>xi</sup>. And so was the fate of 27 years old Mishti Mukherjee whose prolonged adherence to Keto diet resulted in death due to renal failure<sup>xii</sup>.

There's a mad rush to hit the gyms and beauty salons for a quick fix solution to get fit and fab. People are opting for mindless working out which many a times turn out to be fatal due to lack of medical supervision. Working out aggressively to get in shape within a short span of time has resulted in increased heart attacks. Siddhaanth Vir Surryavanshi, Raju Srivastava, Puneeth Rajkumar, Abir Goswami and some other celebrities have died during and after intense workouts. Naomi Wolf draws a fascinating allegory of Iron Maiden to depict the contemporary hallucination to conform to the beauty ideals often leading to cynical consequences (Wolf, 1991). Iron Maiden was a medieval German instrument of torture where the victim was enclosed inside a body-shaped casket having metal spikes in its interior (Wolf, 1991). Similarly today people find themselves trapped in this "cruel" and "euphemistically painted" world of perfection (Wolf, 1991). There is nothing wrong in grooming oneself or to use adornment to enhance one's beauty. But the problem with cosmetics or working out exists only when one feels inadequate or invisible without it (Wolf, 1991). When one is forced to groom or adorn oneself to protect one's identity or goes hungry in order to keep pace with the evolving trends, "that is exactly what makes beauty hurt" (Wolf, 1991).

FOMO or Fear of Missing Out is another by-product of excessive exposure to social media. It's not a new human experience however today's society has more channels than before that provokes this fear. British psychologists defined it as "pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" coupled with a "desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing"<sup>xiii</sup>. FOMO is accompanied by a perception that others are having more fun and leading quality lives or experiencing better things than oneself with a "constant need for personal validation and rewarding appraisals of distorted sense of self"<sup>xiv</sup>. People suffering from FOMO often find themselves ruminating over social media and keep on frequently checking and refreshing their feeds for alerts and notifications<sup>xv</sup>. This subsequently intensifies the levels of anxiety in order to keep up with the theme with anticipation of a reward<sup>xvi</sup>. A deep sense of envy, unhappiness, reduced productivity, emotional tension, anxiety, restlessness, lower self-esteem and unhealthy behaviours is keenly entwined with this constant "upward social comparisons" and unreasonable expectations.<sup>xvii</sup>

Today people are more exposed to what others are doing which often leads to uncertainty about whether they are doing enough after witnessing the ‘distorted perceptions of edited lives of others’<sup>xviii</sup>. In a recent Belgian study it was found that increased social media usage is associated with lower emotional stability and conscientiousness<sup>xix</sup>. Moreover the longer time spent on social networking sites (spending more than 2 hours per day) demonstrated a significantly higher risk of suicides<sup>xx</sup>. In the past few years committing suicides while live-casting on social networking sites like Facebook is quite a recurrent phenomenon.

Another aspect of social media is the trolling, cyber bullying and hate speech. “Internet trolling” involves ‘baiting’ people by irritating them”, inciting and provoking them, “making fun of their opinions, etc for whatever reasons” (Durrani et al., 2021). Now the netizens have the power to hide behind a screen and execrate through their words, comments, emojis and GIFs and thereby “inciting an answer through provocation” is their ultimate motto (Durrani et al., 2021). “Another form of rage provocation is through hate speech against all that a social media user disagrees with as the internet provides the user with the comfort of hidden identity to spark hatred through hate speech and provoke individuals to commit crimes against humanities” (Durrani et al., 2021). Trolls lurk behind the anonymity provided by the internet and make unwanted and scrappy comments in order to incite other users resulting in squabbles and spats (Durrani et al., 2021). Sometimes it is done in a calculated manner to deliberately upset others with their malicious comments. While on one hand such baiting often leaves the baited traumatized, on the other hand the trolls get stronger by the day because of the power of anonymity provided by the social media (Durrani et al., 2021). In common parlance, “hate speech” refers to “offensive discourse targeting a group or an individual based on inherent characteristics (such as race, religion or gender) and that may threaten social peace”<sup>xxi</sup>. “To provide a unified framework for the United Nations to address the issue globally, the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as...any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”<sup>xxii</sup>. This has resulted in increased hate crimes and contributed to violence ranging from lynching to ethnic cleansing.

Hate crimes leading to massive human desolation have been reported across the globe. The mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand 2019 is a prime instance of hate crimes galvanized by religious hatred against a particular part of the population. Recently India has raised her concern over the human rights encroachment and increasing hate crimes in US against Indians over there. The ghastly death news of four members of a Sikh family in United States sent shockwaves running across the Indian community all over the world<sup>xxiii</sup> and so did the news of 20year old Varun Manish Chheda who was stabbed to death on Purdue University<sup>xxiv</sup>.

Besides the above mentioned ones, another major pitfall of

social media is the spread of fake news. The moment we open our social media feed, we are bombarded with information. It is of utmost importance to tell apart the fake ones from the real ones. These fabricated stories are put together to influence readers’ opinions, to deceive them or simply to garner more views. Primarily fake news consists of three different notions: misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information.<sup>xxv</sup> This information disorder comes in different packages including “satire, false connection, and misrepresentation of facts, imposter content, manipulated content, and fabricated content”<sup>xxvi</sup>. Some people spread it for political, ideological, or business interests, while some does just for jest<sup>xxvii</sup>. Generally users don’t even think twice while sharing any content on social media before verifying if that is fake or real.

During the pandemic, there were varieties of fake news on COVID-19 which were spreading like wild fire across social media platforms. From offering unvaried home remedies to tackle the virus to floating fake advisories asking people to avoid certain food, sharing conspiracy theories, social media feeds were flooded with misinformation<sup>xxviii</sup>. Even Prime Minister Narendra Modi also requested the citizens not to pay heed to the rumors surrounding Covid-19.<sup>xxix</sup> There are actually ways to weed out the fake news by getting on to the primary source and cross checking it with another source.

Another menace of social media is the increasing cases of people getting duped by the fraudsters through social media and the scammers are devising new ways to hoodwink people. In the recent past in June 2023, the Gautam Budh Nagar police arrested an eight-person gang, including seven foreign nationals, on Wednesday for duping women out of large sums of money by befriending them on social media sites<sup>xxx</sup>. The investigators stated that this gang of six men and two women has duped at least 600 to 700 women in India out of lakhs of rupees in the past year.<sup>xxxi</sup> Another scam which is on the rise is the parcel or courier scam where the scammers under the guise of courier executives and CBI officers falsely claim that a parcel containing illegal items has been seized at the airport and subsequently, they ask the victims to make a payment and that’s how they siphon off the money<sup>xxxii</sup>. Other forms of cyber harassment involve extortion, web jacking, phishing, stalking and voyeurism.

Users may have millions of subscribers and followers but this virtual fan following do not always mirrors their offline life. Social media has uncannily conned us in believing that we have friends while in reality this is just the contrary. Instead of meeting someone in person or calling over phone, it’s much easier these days to add them on Instagram, Facebook or Snapchat. This stimulates a form of connection where we feel more connected than we actually are. This virtual intimacy where we get a sneak-peek into someone’s life through their posts rarely reflects their authentic selves. We can never fathom what an individual might be going through in his real life by the glimpse of their picturesque vacation posts or heavily staged selfies. People are committing suicides after sharing motivational posts across social media. This world is actually deceptive and illusionary where we are constantly seeking

validation. Online life is portrayed as the best version of oneself where people gets easily disillusioned by the pretty pictures and smiling faces. Where as in reality lives are often messier than we realize. 'Pics or it didn't happen'<sup>xxxiii</sup> is the shibboleth of this new- age social media platforms of the millennials. Scores of mishaps have been reported where casualties have caused after the social media stunts went fatally wrong. Facebook timelines and Instagram feeds are imbued with the recordings and broadcasting of one's accomplishments ranging from recent purchases, degrees, jobs, vacations, food<sup>xxxiv</sup> and that's how sharing our every moment in social media has become the norm of the day.

## CONCLUSION

But having said so, it would be absolutely wrong to endorse only the cynical aspects of social media. These platforms are a double-edged sword which can either be used for disseminating obscenity, slander, hatred, fake news, rumours else can be utilized to the fullest for enhanced networking, fostering support and empathy and even as an efficacious learning tool. People across professions and communities can discuss array of things adding to the plethora of knowledge, enlightening others and keeping us abreast with the current affairs and the things that are happening around the world. We have witnessed the power of social media many a times, especially during pandemic. From creating awareness to providing information regarding the availability of beds, oxygen supply, vaccines, food these platforms have contributed immensely in combating this crisis. Besides, social media do play an important role in voicing the demands of many by mobilizing and organising support for a cause. This powerful communication medium has dramatically revolutionized many spheres. The ultimate choice lies with the users whether to entangle one selves in the labyrinth of social media and emerging trends or to make the most of it for advancing growth and development.

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